DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 332 SP 031 636

AUTHOR Marshall, Faith
TITLE Non-Judgmental Induction Support: An Investment in Teacher Potential.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conferences of the National Conference of the National Council of States on Inservice Education (13th, New Orleans, LA, November 18-22, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; *College School Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Practicums; *Program Development; *Research Utilization; *Teacher Orientation
IDENTIFIERS *Beginning Teacher Induction; Texas (Houston)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents research findings that suggest a framework for developing essential support systems for beginning teachers, and describes two induction-year pilot projects, now in operation, based on those findings. One project is a Master's level course instituted in August 1987 at the Univesity of Houston; the other is a program collaboratively developed and implemented by university faculty and educators of the Houston Independent School District. The core element of both programs is non-judgmental support for first year teachers. (Author/JD)

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NON-JUDGMENTAL INDUCTION SUPPORT:
AN INVESTMENT IN TEACHER POTENTIAL

FAITH MARSHALL

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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SP 031 636

A paper presented to The National Council of States on Inservice Education, Thirteenth Annual Staff Development Conference New Orleans, Louisiana, November 1988

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents research findings that suggest a framework for developing essential support systems for beginning teachers, and describes two induction year pilot projects, now in operation, based on those findings. One project is a Master's level course instituted in August, 1987 at the University of Houston; the other is a program collaboratively developed and implemented by university faculty and educators of the Houston Independent School District.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

There is in the literature a plethora of data on what happens to newly certified teachers as they leave their preservice teacher education institutions and experience the challenges of their first year of full professional responsibility. These teachers themselves, through the years, have provided the data (Jersild, 1966; Fuller & Bown, 1975; Tisher, 1979; Felder et al, 1979; Ryan et al, 1980). The range of often unmet needs expressed is extensive, and includes the need to have opportunities to share concerns and frustrations with knowledgeable educators without fearing to be judged and possibly evaluated as inadequate. There are very few induction programs described in the literature (Johnston, 1981;

Marshall, 1982; Association of Teacher Educators, 1987) which separate assistance from assessment.

One study (Marshall, 1982) surveyed reports on induction programs dating back to 1942, compiled a list of fifteen identified practices to assist novice teachers, and obtained the perceptions of 289 inductees as to the relative effectiveness of these practices. The study yielded clear evidence 1) that those practices felt to be most helpful all involved a professional, knowledgeable resource person (or persons) who would not have an evaluative role in relation to the beginning teacher, to whom the inductee would have ready access, and whose help would be ongoing during that first year, and 2) that a potentially very helpful practice would be meetings or workshops expressly focused on beginning teachers' expressed needs.

The importance of these two elements in an induction support system were underscored by comments of thirty of the subjects in the study who were personally interviewed. These respondents frequently spoke of a reluctance to risk asking for help from someone who might use such requests against them in an evaluation report (p. 83). Additionally, they often referred to valuing inservice meetings in their districts only if

those meetings addressed their felt needs, and if the agendas reflected an empathetic understanding of what they were experiencing (p. 73).

Within a few years following the 1982 study cited above, as statistics showed an alarming number of beginning teachers leaving the field, and as projections for the near future indicated demand for teachers outstripping supply, attention to effective induction programs emerged strongly among all segments of educational forces in the United States (Association of Teacher Educators, 1987).

A UNIVERSITY-SPONSORED PILOT INDUCTION PROGRAM

Using the findings of the Marshall study (1982), and taking into account the stress levels and time pressures of first year teachers (Ryan, 1974; Lortie, 1975), a Master's level course, "Practicum for First Year Teachers" was designed as a pilot project at the College of Education, University of Houston in 1987. A group of 14 of that school's May, 1987 graduates, about to begin full-time professional teaching positions, enrolled in the 3-credit course, which involves a minimum of 45 hours of participant-faculty contact time over two semesters, rather than one semester, thereby providing a continuous support system without adding, unrealistically, to time demands on the inductee.

The purpose of the Practicum, now in its second year, is to offer first year teachers an opportunity to participate, within a high-trust environment, in a regular series of workshops/seminars devoted to non-evaluative support in 1) applying their teacher education knowledge to the real life of day-to-day teaching, 2) cooperative solving of the inevitable problems that arise in the beginning teacher experience, 3) reflecting on their strengths and limitations, and 4) sharing experiences with empathetic peers.

Participants meet with their faculty facilitator for a six-hour orientation workshop in August preparatory to the beginning of their induction year. Subsequently they meet, over the academic year, for 13 three-hour support sessions. Additionally, a minimum of two two-hour individual conferences are scheduled for each participant and the facilitator, who is also accessible to inductees by telephone as needed.

Course content is driven by the felt needs of the participants. Toward those ends, research and literature in the field is drawn upon, guest specialists are invited as their expertise is appropriate, and the facilitator's and the participants' knowledge and professional experience are shared.

Requirements, in addition to a commitment to attendance and participation, expect each inductee to keep an ongoing daily journal of school and classroom events that occur, and their reactions to these events. Patterns are noted, progress is identified and future goals are derived from the journal analyses by the participant and facilitator. Each participant is further expected to take responsibility for reading current literature relating to those aspects of teaching of greatest concern to that individual inductee. Analyses and responses to readings are incorporated into the journal writings.

Evaluation of the first year of this pilot project is now being completed. Questionnaires on most helpful induction practices , the Fuller Instrument of Teacher Concerns (Fuller & Bown, 1975) and an individual interview protocol were used with the 14 participants and with 14 non-participating inductees who had completed their training at the same time and at the same institution as had the Practicum participants. Preliminary data indicate that access to non-judgmental facilitation was seen as most helpful by those who had experienced it, and as potentially most helpful by those who had not experienced it.

Data obtained on levels of teacher concerns shows more evidence of movement to the higher levels of concerns on the part of those who said

they had access to non-judgmental facilitation. Interview data reiterated the conclusion of the 1982 (Marshall, p. 97) study that inductees valued highly having opportunities to "let off steam" and to be reassured that most problems are common to all first year teachers.

An anecdotal diary kept by the facilitator during the first year is now being analyzed for the nature of concerns for which participants used the immediate telephone access to the facilitator.

An incidental, but potentially significant, effect of the Practicum is that it represents an early commitment of those teachers with Bachelor's degrees to further study. These teachers are now enrolled in the graduate program of the College of Education, University of Houston and can apply the Practicum credit hours to a Master's Degree program.

One limitation of the Practicum as support is that the facilitator has no relationship to the public school hierarchy in terms of any power to recommend to those authorities ways of helping the inductee. In several documented incidents during the first year, however, this limitation led the facilitator and the peer participants to empower beginning teachers to find ways to negotiate successfully needed changes with their supervisors/administrators in their schools.

If the provision of non-judgmental induction support is recognized to be an effective practice to help novice teachers develop and remain in the profession, it becomes necessary to examine how it can be offered to larger numbers of inductees.

The opportunity to come to grips with the challenge of numbers was provided when the facilitator of the Practicum was invited, in March, 1988, to be part of the collaboration of the Houston Independent School District and area universities in developing a pilot induction project to begin in August, 1988 for 300 beginning teachers of that District. A description of this project follows.

A COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY PILOT INDUCTION PROGRAM FOR 300 INDUCTEES

In March 1988 the Houston Independent School District proposed a comprehensive teacher induction program for entry-level teachers. This would be a pilot program to include 300 of the almost 1500 new teachers expected to be employed for the 1988-89 school year. It would be designed and implemented by the district in collaboration with representatives of nine area universities.

Assessment, to be carried out according to the established Texas Teacher Assessment System by district administrators and supervisors,

would be separated from assistance. The comprehensive program which was then developed is now in operation. It offers non-judgmental assistance to entry level teachers by providing:

1) a mentor teacher in close proximity to and in a similar subject area/grade level to that of each inductee,

2) six teacher-scholars, in a newly-created educator position, each one being a resource for approximately 50 inductees and their 50 mentor teachers,

3) a four-day orientation workshop in August, prior to the beginning of the school year, at which time the 300 inductees meet in "job alike" groups (serving as non-judgmental support networks) with Master Teachers as facilitators, and through which maximum preparation of inductees for starting the school year successfully can take place,

4) seven full-day conferences over the course of the entry year which include a) choices of workshops and seminars responsive to the felt needs of the inductees and delivered by faculty members of the collaborating universities, H. I. S. D. Teacher Scholars and other district instructional personnel, and b) "job alike" groups carried over as continuing non-judgmental support networks from the August orientation session,

5) two full-day conferences expressly designed by experts in the field to enable the 300 mentor teachers to develop skills necessary for their successful assistance to inductees, and

6) a doctoral level course on research in teacher education, with special emphasis on induction processes, for the teacher-scholars who are committed to reflection, inquiry and problem solving in their work with inductees and mentors.

As this second pilot program has evolved, the University of Houston has evidenced emerging leadership in the collaborative process. University and public school faculty worked together to plan the details of the four day orientation sessions, and to train the support group leaders. A faculty member of its College of Education, the facilitator of the Practicum described earlier, is assigned for half-time service to the Induction Program. Saturday conferences and the graduate studies of the teacher-scholars take place at the University of Houston College of Education. The proposed design for evaluation of the project is being prepared by researchers at this University.

However, faculty of the other universities in the area are serving as leaders for workshops and seminars, and there will be extensive future opportunities for their greater involvement if, as is now envisioned, the

project increases to serve all of the 1989-90 entry level teachers in the Houston Independent School District.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to identify a core element to be considered in developing an induction program: non-judgmental support for first year teachers. The opportunity for a first year teacher to reflect, inquire and problem solve in a "safe space" with others experiencing similar challenges, and with an experienced non-evaluating educator, has rarely been offered to novice teachers in an organized, systematic way.

Two fledgling programs which provide such opportunities have been described. They have yet to be fully evaluated, but they may offer valuable signposts at a time when legislators, teacher education institutions, public school systems and professional organizations are justifiably concerned with maximum development of teacher potential.

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